

OBITUARIES

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Emil Villa

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ALAMO — Legendary restaurateur Emil Villa, whose Hickory Pit barbecued spareribs tantalized four decades of Eastbay food-lovers, died here yesterday at 87.

Villa's career began in 1943 when he bought the small Hickory Pit restaurant at the 45th Street and Telegraph Avenue in Oakland from Henry Hirschenfield.

By 1979, when he sold to the Clorox Corporation, Villa had four flourishing restaurants in San Leandro, Oakland, Walnut Creek and Hayward.

He served as a consultant to Clorox for several years after the sale and remained active in business affairs until shortly before his death.

"Everybody loved him. He was a very hardworking, straightforward man," said Grace Slagle, a long-time employee of the Hickory Pit restaurant in Walnut Creek. "He was a very proud man and he wanted everything done right."

Villa insisted on inspecting each of his four restaurants daily until he was nearly 80, when he sold to Clorox, Slagle said.

"Oh my, we missed him" after the sale, she said. "We still do."

"He always stressed quality," said Eastbay restaurant writer Perry Phillips. "Everything was prepared fresh daily — there was just no place like his place."

A native of Italy, Villa immigrated to the United States in 1914 and followed his father and brother to Oakland.

He worked first as a baker,

then operated the Liberty Market on 43rd Street and Telegraph Avenue with his brother, James.

Villa is survived by a daughter, Marilyn Villa Pierson of Alamo, and five grandchildren: Laura Sawyer of Santa Rosa; Christine Pierson; Susan Pierson and Nancy Jannisje of Danville; and Michael Pierson of San Luis Obispo.

He is also survived by his sister, Nicolina Rebagliati of Stella, Italy; a brother, Caesar Villa, of Buenos Aires, Argentina; and three great-grandchildren.

A rosary will be recited at 7:30 p.m. today at St. Isadore's Catholic Church, 445 La Gonda Way, Danville. A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at 10:30 a.m. tomorrow at the same church.